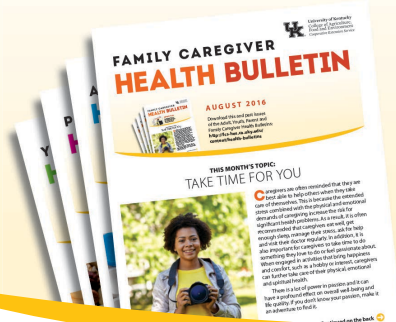


# FAMILY CAREGIVER HEALTH BULLETIN



**FEBRUARY 2017**

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## THIS MONTH'S TOPIC:

# TALKING TO CHILDREN ABOUT DEATH



**I**t is important for parents and caregivers to remember that when a loved one dies, everyone is affected, including children. It is not uncommon for a parent to try to maintain a child's innocence and shield them from the trauma, yet developmentally it is important for children to have the opportunity to be a part of the grieving process. It is important for parents and caregivers to recognize the developmental maturity of children to better help them cope.

Psychologist, Maria Nygy encouraged children to participate in proper grief practices based on their age. She coined three developmental stages in which children understand death.

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# Children should be encouraged to participate in grief practices so that they do not have to face the sadness on their own.

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➔ Continued from page 1

## Ages 3-5

Children in this stage may believe that the dead “live on” but in a way that they might do less. Death, for example, may resemble sleep and the person can return to living. Or they may believe that doctors or ambulances are “magic fixers.” Children of this age do not necessarily think that they can die. During this stage, children do demonstrate fear — not of dying, but of separation.

## Ages 5-9

In this stage, children begin to understand that death is final and that it is irreversible but they may associate death with images such as skeletons or monsters. As a result, children of this age believe that they can avoid, “outsmart” or even “outrun” death. They may realize that there are many ways that others can die, but not that they can die. Death of a parent at this age may deprive a child of important recognition and encouragement.

## Ages 9+

Around the age of 9 and older, children are able to demonstrate a more mature concept of death that includes the finality and universality of it. They understand that death is a result of a biological process. Teenagers, who are already often struggling with trying to answer the question, “Who am I?” tend to look at death as a threat that jeopardizes their goals and dreams and/or forces them to grow up more quickly. A teenager struggling with death may also be at greater risk for unresolved issues.

To help a child who has lost a loved one, Kids Health recommends that parents and caregivers:

- **Listen.** Remember that each child will react differently to loss.
- **Express emotions.** Some children will have a hard time translating what they feel into words. It can be helpful to talk about your own feelings to help make a child feel comfortable with their own.

- **Be honest.** Tell your child what to expect and that there will be changes and that it will be okay.
- **Take kids to funerals and talk about death rituals.** Tell your child ahead of time what to expect and how people will likely be reacting and feeling.
- **Talk about body disposition.** Explain burial or cremation using developmentally appropriate language.
- **Give your child a job.** Sometimes having a role or sense of purpose during a time that seems uncertain can help a child cope better.
- **Keep a person’s memory alive.** Talk about the person who has died, recall happy memories and acknowledge or celebrate special dates. You can create new traditions in honor of the loved one.

To help your child grieve and feel better, it is most important for you to give your child, regardless of his age, the appropriate time to heal from the loss. Ongoing conversations should continue in the days, weeks and months after a death. If your child seems sad, withdrawn, worried or upset, provide comfort and reassurance. There are also support or grief groups for kids and counseling services available if you think your child is struggling.

### SOURCES:

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### REFERENCES:

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**FAMILY CAREGIVER  
HEALTH BULLETIN**

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